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ABSTRACT

Two experiments were conducted on the development of the ability to interpret bossy/dominant and nice/submissive nuances in requests. Syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone were hypothesized to be cues for relative bossiness and niceness because these characteristics are varied predictably with listeners of different statuses. In the first experiment, 32 preschoolers determined which request was bossier for 8 pairs contrasting syntactic directness, semantic softeners, or tone. In the second experiment, 60 subjects (5- and 10-year-olds and adults) heard 45 requests with combinations of different levels of syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, tone, and speaker status. In both experiments, subjects systematically used characteristics of requests as cues. It was found that preschoolers have the rudimentary ability to identify nuances in requests and that children are able to take into account more linguistic factors and integrate them in increasingly complex ways as they get older. This pragmatic skill was seen as having implications for social competence. (Author/RH)

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The development of the abilities to interpret requests with bossy and nice nuances

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Abstract

Two experiments were conducted on the development of the ability to interpret bossy/dominant and nice/submissive nuances in requests. Syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone were hypothesized to be "cues" for relative bossiness and niceness because these characteristics are varied predictably with listeners of different statuses. In Experiment 1, 32 preschoolers determined which request was bossier for 8 pairs contrasting syntactic directness, semantic softeners, or tone. In Experiment 2, 60 subjects (5 and 10 year olds and adults) heard 45 requests with combinations of different levels of syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, tone, and speaker status. In both experiments, subjects systematically used characteristics of requests as cues. Preschoolers have the rudimentary ability to identify nuances in requests. Children are able to take into account more linguistic factors and integrate them in increasingly complex ways as they get older. This pragmatic skills has implications for social competence.

The development of the abilities to interpret requests with bossy and nice nuances

When children acquire language, they must learn more than syntax, semantics, and phonology. To achieve communicative competence, they must also have facility in pragmatics. Pragmatics, the appropriate use of language in social contexts, involves the interaction among speakers, listeners, and a given situation. That is, in order to produce language appropriately, a speaker takes into account various contextual factors. For example, in order to close a conversation, a speaker can choose among utterances such as Bye, See you later, alligator, Aloha and Have a nice day on the basis of knowledge of the listener and the situation (e.g., setting, discourse context). Similarly, comprehension of an utterance involves attention both to the utterance itself and to the context in which the utterance is spoken. For example, the utterance How lovely may be interpreted differently depending on whether it is used at the ballet, on a highway upon passing a run over animal, or with a filthy young child who has just been bathed and dressed for a birthday party. Besides conveying a basic meaning, each utterance provides information about the situation, the speaker, and the speaker's beliefs about the relationship between speaker and listener.

Most utterances provide social information beyond what is obvious in their content and form. This is particularly true of requests, which are quintessential examples of social speech. (In this article, the term "request " refers inclusively to an utterance that is intended to

regulate a listener's behavior.) The ability to make requests effectively is a highly important social, communicative skill. In order for children to successfully accomplish things with the help of other children and adults, they must learn to use requests appropriately and strategically.

Requests make up a substantial portion of children's early speech (Cherry Wilkinson, Clevenger, & Dollaghan, 1981; Dore, 1977; Ervin-Tripp, 1977) and help them initiate and maintain social interaction (Levin & Rubin, 1983; Mishler, 1975; Mueller, 1972; Schwartzman, 1976; Spilton & Lee, 1977). Because requests are so frequent and require an array of linguistic and social skills, they are an excellent phenomenon through which to study pragmatic and social cognitive development.

Laboratory and observational studies have shown that children produce and comprehend many forms of requests by the time they are five or six years old (see Becker, 1982, for a review of this literature). Furthermore, children's use of these different forms in conversation is systematically related to a number of contextual factors, one of which (and the one most thoroughly studied) is the relative status of speaker and listener. "Status" refers to the power that an individual actually has or is perceived to have to control resources (broadly contrued). A person's status may be by virtue of age, physical strength, or role, for example. Just as adults do, children tend to use requests that have a particular set of characteristics with listeners of higher status than they are and requests that have a different set of characteristics with listeners of lower status.

There are three characteristics that typically differentiate requests addressed to higher status listeners from requests addressed to lower status listeners: syntactic directness, semantic markers, and tone of

voice. Children use these characteristics to differentiate requests to adult vs. child listeners, fathers vs. mothers, dominant vs. less dominant peers, and listeners holding a variety of status-linked roles such as doctor and a nurse and teacher and pupil (Becker, 1982).

Syntactic directness, a widely-used concept described by Ervin-Tripp (1977), is a measure of how explicitly the structure of a sentence indicates that it is a request and what it entails. Children tend to use more direct forms like the imperative Give me the book with lower status listeners and more indirect forms like the question directive Have any books? with higher status listeners.

The presence of semantic markers also differentiates the two groups of request forms. Semantic markers (a term coined by Labov, 1966) are words or phrases that change the meaning of a request and that cannot be described in terms of Ervin-Tripp's system. Requests to lower status listeners tend to include semantic aggravators (e.g., threats, profanity) that increase the degree of coerciveness. Requests to higher status listeners, in contrast, tend to include semantic softeners (e.g., please, reasons for the request, and promises like If you give me that, I'll give you this) that mitigate the request.

Similarly, tone differentiates the two groups of requests: requests to lower status listeners tend to have a loud, negative tone while requests to higher status listeners tend to have a soft, positive tone. Essentially, requests to lower status listeners appear more threatening and straightforward. Requests to higher status listeners are more appeasing and ambiguous and seem to allow listeners a variety of alternative responses (Becker, 1984).

Children clearly use characteristics of requests to mark status relationships between themselves and their listeners. The underlying knowledge children have that enables them to differentiate requests to listeners of different statuses, however, has not been adequately investigated. That is, virtually no systematic research has been conducted on the knowledge children have about the relation between relative status and the syntactic, semantic, and intonational characteristics of requests.

One strategy by which one can begin to investigate children's knowledge of this relationship is to present them with requests and have them infer the relative status of the speakers of those requests. The overall predictability of request usage provides a means for making such inferences. To the extent that children's knowledge of the social usage of requests is general, one might expect that they could use the syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone of requests as reliable "cues" to the status relationship between a speaker and listener. Syntactic indirectness, semantic softeners, and a soft, positive tone, in the absence of other information, might serve as cues that the speaker is or is acting submissive or of lower status because these are characteristics of requests typically made by speakers of lower status than their listeners. In contrast, syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and a loud, negative tone might serve as cues that the speaker is or is acting dominant, because these are characteristics of requests typically made by speakers of higher status than their listeners.

Observational evidence suggests that such a signalling system does operate for children and that they are least partially aware of its

mechanisms. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) observed black seven through 12 year olds using requests for which they did not expect compliance, but that were intended to test or manipulate status relationships. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan called these requests "imperative traps." One example involved a seven year old commanding an 11 year old, "Bring your li'l self here." When a third party asked, "Who you think you are?" the speaker replied, "I think I'm somebody big" (p. 204). In another case, an 11 year old bragged, "Hey, ya'll I told Betty to come here and she came" (p. 205). Observations of imperative traps by teenage blacks and Puerto Ricans have also been made by Labov (1972). For a child to succeed with such a challenge is a social coup, since a listener's compliance with what appears to be an "imperious directive" is seen as a loss of face. Similarly, forcing a peer to use "courtesy phrases" such as please is a way to extract a submissive gesture, self-subordination that endows the recipient with status.

These examples show that requests can serve both to mark status relationships that actually exist and falsely to give the appearance of dominance or submissiveness when it is strategic to do so. That is, requests may be used to convey the social nuances of dominance and submissiveness. In terminology that preschoolers use and understand, requests can convey "bossiness" and "niceness." Listeners must be able to recognize such nuances in order to know how to respond and how to interact competently with others.

Two experiments were conducted to assess the development of the ability to infer a speaker's actual or assumed submissiveness or dominance

(operationalized as niceness and bossiness) from characteristics of requests. In the first experiment, preschoolers judged the relative bossiness of pairs of requests that contrasted syntactic directness, semantic softeners, or intonation. In the second, children and adults heard requests consisting of combinations of different levels of syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone, and judged them to be bossy or nice. For both experiments, the purpose was to discover whether and how syntax, semantics, and tone can be used as cues to relative status.

Experiment 1

If indeed syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and a loud, negative tone of voice are cues for dominance, then a request with more of these characteristics would be seen as more dominant or bossier than a request with fewer or less extreme characteristics. The results of two earlier experiments, in which children's judgments of the relative niceness of requests were investigated, suggest that this may be the case.

Bates (1976) developed a technique for assessing children's inferences about the niceness of requests. Children are shown two identical frog puppets that each make requests. The children must give a piece of candy to the frog that asks most nicely. There are eight pairs of requests, each of which differs only with respect to syntactic directness, semantic softeners, or tone of voice. Using this task with young Italian children (Bates, 1976) and with young English-speaking children (Bates & Silvern, 1977), Bates found that children judged the requests that were more like those made by a lower status speaker (i.e.,

were most indirect syntactically, had more semantic softeners, or had a softer, more positive tone) to be nicer than other requests. By the time they were between four and five years of age, children were able to respond to the contrasts as predicted at a level greater than chance.

The present experiment was based on Bates' (1976) task, but utilized a set of requests that contrasted a wider range of syntactic and semantic forms than those she used. In addition, two boy dolls rather than two animal dolls were used in order to make the task more realistic. It was predicted that the converse of Bates' results would be obtained; that children would judge the requests that were more syntactically direct, contained fewer semantic softeners, and were made in a louder, harsher tone to be bossier than other requests. It was further predicted, given Bates' (1976) results as well as five year olds' greater experience with requests and greater cognitive development, that five year olds would make inferences based on subtler contrasts than would the four year olds.

Method

Subjects. Sixteen children (8 girls, 8 boys) between the ages of 4 and 4½ (mean age: 50 months) and 16 children (8 girls, 8 boys) between the ages of 5½ and 6 years (mean age: 69 months) participated in the study. Children were middle-class, native English speakers with no hearing impairments who were drawn from two midwestern preschools and a departmental file of parents willing to have their children participate in research.

Materials. Eight pairs of stimulus requests were constructed. Each pair differed only with respect to one of the hypothesized cues for dominance. Table 1 shows the stimulus sentences used in this study and

the types of contrasts they represent. The top member of each pair

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contains the characteristic predicted to be a stronger cue for relative dominance. Request pairs were arranged in random order with the member of the pair containing the cue for dominance appearing randomly either first or second.

Procedure. Children were tested individually. First, they were asked "what it means when someone is bossy" in order to ensure that they understood this term. Children were told that the two identical boy dolls (who were the children's age) were going to ask them for pennies and that they should point to the boy who asked in a bossier way. The experimenter, using her own voice (as in Bates & Silvern, 1977), had each doll address one member of each stimulus pair to the children. Tone of voice was kept the same within each pair except for the contrast involving tone. After each pair, children were asked which boy had asked in a bossier way.

Results and discussion

Tone of voice, semantics, and syntactic directness, in the absence of other information, did function for four and five year olds as cues to a speaker's relative bossiness. Children responded as predicted to a mean of 6.3 of 8 of the stimulus pairs. The four year olds, however, were less strongly affected by these cues than were the five year olds.

The effect of age was revealed as a main effect of a 2 (age) x 2 (sex) analysis of variance on number of responses in the predicted direction,

F (1,28) = 45.4, $p < .001$. The five year olds responded as predicted to a mean of 7.3 of 8 of the stimulus pairs, whereas the four year olds responded as predicted to a mean of only 5.3 of 8. Both the efficacy of the cues and age differences in response to them was also shown by an item analysis of both age groups' responses.

Table 2 shows the proportion of children in both age groups responding as predicted to each stimulus pair. Chi square analyses were performed

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on the number of children represented by these proportions. While a significant number of five year olds responded as predicted to all of the stimulus pairs, the four year olds did so on only three of eight. Four year olds responded at chance level on the other five pairs. An examination of the three stimulus pairs revealed that two represented extreme contrasts of tone or syntactic directness: GIVE ME A PENNY! (a loud, negative request) vs. Give me a penny (a soft, neutral request) and Gimme a penny (an imperative) vs. I really like pennies (a hint). The third contrast to which the four year olds responded as predicted, I want a penny (general verb form) vs. I would like a penny (polite verb form), is not substantially different from the other semantic contrasts and may be just one specific form they have acquired. The other stimulus pairs contrast to a lesser extent or represent knowledge of specific, conventionalized usage the four year olds may not have acquired yet.

This pattern of results is quite similar to that Bates (1976) obtained. In contrast with the present results, however, she found that even very young children reliably identified a request with please as nicer than a

request without this softener. Apparently, children associate requests that contain please with niceness, but do not necessarily associate requests without please with bossiness. The superior performance of the older children is probably due to their greater experience with a range of requests used in a variety of situations. This, as well as their greater cognitive abilities, provides five year olds with richer, more general knowledge and enables them to draw inferences to novel social domains. The knowledge of the four year olds is less extensive and less open to generalization, so their performance is not as good or consistent.

In addition to an effect of age, the 2 (age) x 2 (sex) analysis of variance on number of responses in the predicted direction revealed an unexpected effect of sex, F (1,28) = 4.43, $p < .05$. Boys responded as predicted to a mean of 7.6 of the 8 pairs, in contrast to the girls, who responded as predicted to a mean of 7 of the 8 pairs. There was not a significant interaction of age with sex on number of responses in the predicted direction. The direction of the effect of sex is somewhat anomolous and counter-intuitive, since girls of this age are often shown to have more advanced language abilities, and studies of children's use of requests have revealed no sex differences (e.g., Bates, 1976; Bates & Silvern, 1977; James, 1978). The obtained effect may be a function of the boy dolls used in the experiment or boys' greater facility with the concept "bossy." Although the main effect of sex was statistically significant, it was both too small to be meaningful and is possibly unreplicable. In analyses of the second experiment, sex was not considered as a factor.

Children's definitions of bossiness provide an unexpected source of

data in support of the predicted relationship between the characteristics of requests and the status of speaker and listener. When asked to define "bossy" at the beginning of the task, all children showed that they understood this term, indicating that "bossy" meant having some form of power over others. In addition, many children spontaneously mentioned language in their definitions and said something more specific than simply that a bossy person "bosses you around." Two four year olds and half of the five year olds defined "bossy" as involving yelling or ordering others to do things. For example, one four-year-old boy said, "They don't wanna play. When they play house they say, 'Don't come in!'" A five-year-old girl said that bossy means "yelling and not letting people do what they want to do, just what they want to do." Similarly, another girl this age said, "They boss you around and they tell you what to do. They make people do things what (sic) they don't want to do."

The results of this experiment indicate that four and five year olds can use tone of voice, semantics, and syntactic directness as cues to a speaker's actual or assumed relative status. The four year olds, though, were only reliably able to use extremely different examples of these cues.

Experiment 1 involved children's comparisons of pairs of requests that differed only with respect to one cue at a time. Actual discourse, however, involves requests in which syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone vary simultaneously. The development of the ability to interpret more complex requests was evaluated in a second experiment.

Experiment 2

When people use requests, they convey information syntactically, semantically, and intonationally. As Experiment 1 demonstrates, children view requests with linguistic characteristics typically used with lower status listeners as bossier than other requests. It is not clear how they would interpret requests containing several different cues, especially if some of the cues were for higher status and some for lower.

No prior work has directly addressed this issue, although several researchers have suggested a mechanism for interpreting complex requests. For example, Bates and Silvern (1977) have stated that niceness or politeness is a linear function of the number of polite elements in a request. That is, the more elements such as please, modals, titles, indirect syntax, and a singsong intonation a request has, the more polite it is, regardless of the context in which it is used. Both they and James (1978) used this concept as a way to measure the degree of politeness of requests their subjects produced; the degree of politeness was equal to the number of polite elements. Lakoff also took this position in some of her early work (1972, 1973).

On the other hand, niceness or politeness may not be interpreted that simply. While it is generally true that syntactic indirectness, semantic softeners, and a soft, positive tone are cues for actual or assumed submissiveness, the effect of these cues may not be strictly additive. There are a number of arguments that support this view. First, an accumulation of cues for submissiveness may not necessarily make a request very nice nor would an accumulation of cues for dominance necessarily make a request very bossy. For example, although the use

of low volume, high pitch, and a semantic softener like please make a request nice, the addition of several more pleases and a promise would probably make it obnoxious. Cues may be additive, but only within limits.

Second, cues for dominance that co-occur with cues for submissiveness may be weighted differently. For example, a request may be syntactically indirect, use several semantic softeners, be said quietly, and have a harsh, sarcastic tone. It would probably not be perceived as nice (even though it had several cues for submissiveness and only one for dominance), because tone may be weighted more strongly. Tone is a cue on which people rely heavily in judging submissiveness and dominance (Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams, & Burgess, 1970) and, as the first experiment shows, it is a salient cue for young children as well.

The third reason that the niceness and bossiness of requests may not be a linear function of the cues in those requests is that context (or appropriateness) is also a factor. A request that is appropriate for a child to use with an adult might be seen as too nice and therefore bossy and mean if an adult were to use it with a child. Conversely, a request that is appropriate for an adult to use with a child might be seen as impudent and bossy if a lower status child used it with a higher status adult. Thus, there is an interaction of expectations about request usage with characteristics of the request actually used. One might say that the bossy or nice meaning of a request is both "data drive" (by syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone of voice) and "conceptually driven" (by knowledge and expectations about the typical use of requests by different speakers) (Clark, 1979).

Experiment 2 was intended to extend the results of the first. Subjects of different ages judged as bossy or nice requests that varied in syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone of voice. Some of the requests thus had five consistent cues for dominance, some had five consistent cues for submissiveness, and many had cues for both dominance and submissiveness. These combinations permitted an evaluation of the hypothesis that there is not a strictly linear relationship between the cues in requests and their bossy and nice identities. In addition to this manipulation, the requests were spoken by both a man and a boy. In this way, the impact of expectations about the typical usage of requests could be assessed. It was predicted that cues in requests would be weighted differentially and would interact with knowledge of speaker status in determinations of the bossiness and niceness of requests. It was further predicted that the older children and adults would take into account more factors and make subtler distinctions than the younger children, both because of their greater experience with requests and because of their greater cognitive capacity to combine different sources of information simultaneously.

Method

Subjects. Twenty five year olds (10 girls, 10 boys; mean age: 68 months), 20 ten year olds (10 girls, 10 boys; mean age: 123 months), and 20 adults (10 women, 10 men; mean age: 238 months) who were native English speakers with no hearing impairments participated in the study. Children were middle-class and drawn from midwestern preschools and elementary schools and from the subject file. Adults were drawn from a midwestern university's Psychology Department subject pool and received

extra credit in Introductory Psychology for participating. No subjects in this study participated in the first. An additional five-year-old girl was eliminated from the study for failure to complete the task.

Materials. Stimulus sentences consisted of 45 different requests that represented combinations of three levels of syntactic directness (imperative, permission directive, hint), five levels of semantic softeners and aggravators (three aggravators, one aggravator, none, one softener, three softeners), and three levels of tone of voice (aggressive/negative, neutral, submissive/positive). The innocuous items requested (a ball, a book, and a jacket) were randomly distributed across the 45 requests. Three male speakers with accentless, midwestern English (a 22-year-old man, a ten-year-old boy, and a five-year-old boy) each recorded the set of requests. The requests were arranged in random order with the constraints that there be no more than two adjacent requests of the same level of syntactic directness, four adjacent requests by the same speaker, or two adjacent requests in the same tone of voice. In addition, repetitions of particular sentences were separated by at least three other requests. Three seconds of blank tape separated each request. The requests were presented in one of several orders and subjects heard stimulus tapes with the voice of a peer. That is, the five year olds and adults heard tapes of the five year old and man while the ten year olds heard tapes of the ten year old and man.

Requests were presented by means of a Sony TC 110-A portable audio cassette taperecorder that was connected to the receivers of two standard telephones. The taperecorder and bells located by the telephones were controlled by means of a remote switch-box. Telephones were used both

because young children enjoy them and because they approximate a natural situation in which listeners are dependent solely on aural cues for making judgments about speakers and their utterances.

Procedure. Subjects were tested individually. They were seated in front of the telephones and told that they were going to listen to a man and a boy talk to them on the telephones. The drawings above each telephone were explained. Five year olds and adults were told that the boy was five; ten year olds, that he was ten. Adults were also told that the man was a college student like they were. The two callers, subjects were told, were going to ask for things, sometimes a book, sometimes a ball, and sometimes a jacket. Their job was to listen carefully to the way the callers asked and to decide whether the request to them had been bossy or nice. Then one of the telephones rang and subjects were reminded who was calling. Subjects listened to the request over the appropriate telephone and decided whether the speaker had asked in a bossy way or a nice way. If subjects decided that a request was both bossy and nice, they were asked to decide if it was "more bossy" or "more nice." This procedure was repeated for all 90 requests with the experimenter always reminding the subjects who was calling and, for the children, what they were to decide about the requests. In addition, following the first hint, the experimenter explained that that was a way to ask for an item. In this way, subjects knew that all the utterances they heard would be requests.

Following each block of ten requests a buzzer sounded, and subjects were allowed to choose a colored sticker with which they could make a picture. The stickers served not only as a reward but also as a means

of breaking up the repetitiveness of the 30 minute procedure. Children enjoyed both the experimental procedure and the stickers.

Results and discussion

Subjects' identifications of requests as bossy and nice clearly indicated that they were not processing cues in a strictly linear fashion. Furthermore, they did not weight cues for dominance and submissiveness equally in making their identifications.

Subjects' non-linear treatment of cues was most clearly revealed by two analyses. First, stimulus requests were categorized according to their net number of cues for dominance or submissiveness. For example, a hint with three semantic softeners and a soft positive tone had five cues for submissiveness; an imperative with one semantic aggravator and a neutral tone had two cues for dominance; and an imperative with a soft positive tone and no semantic softeners or aggravators had no net cues for either dominance or submissiveness. A test of trends was performed by means of polynomial regression on the net number of cues for dominance and submissiveness. Proponents of a linear model for the identification of requests would predict that a linear trend would be the only significant one obtained. However, a cubic trend was the highest order significant trend, F (1,649) = 286.64, $p < .001$, and it accounted for approximately 86% of the variance. This finding held not only for the subjects as a whole, but for each age group as well. It accounted for 94% of the variance for the five year olds, 92% for the ten year olds, and 74% for the adults. A simple, additive model such as Bates (Bates & Silvern, 1977), James (1978), and Lakoff (1972, 1973) have proposed is not sufficient to account for the identification of requests.

In order to determine what strategy subjects were using, a second analysis was conducted. A 3 (age of subject) x 3 (tone of voice: negative, neutral, positive) x 3 (syntactic directness: imperative, permission directive, hint) x 5 (semantics: 3 semantic aggravators, 1 semantic aggravator, none, 1 semantic softener, 3 semantic softeners) x 2 (speaker: man, boy) mixed analysis of variance was done on "bossy" responses. Age was a between-subjects factor while the rest were within-subjects factors. This analysis yielded main effects in predictable directions of semantics, F (4,228) = 650.18, $p < .001$; tone of voice, F (2,114) = 239.43, $p < .001$; and syntactic directness, F (2,114) = 60.22, $p < .001$. The main effects of age of subject and speaker were not significant. Unfortunately, these main effects are qualified by higher order interactions, including a significant interaction of all five factors, F (32,912) = 2.60, $p < .001$.

Because the five-way interaction is essentially uninterpretable, the means that contributed to it were visually explored. They are presented in Figure 1. It appears that semantic cues were weighted most heavily,

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contrary to the prediction that tone would be (although tone figured more importantly in adults' responses). Further analyses of the effects of semantics were thus done. First, an analysis of trends was conducted on the number of requests identified as bossy at each of the five levels of semantic markers. Mirroring the trend analysis on bossy identifications of requests with different net cues, this analysis again revealed a significant cubic trend, F (1,295) = 113.24, $p < .001$. This trend accounted for 81% of the variance. A Scheffe post hoc comparison of the

means at the .05 level revealed that requests with one or three softeners were not identified significantly differently nor were requests with one or three aggravators, but requests with s fteners were identified as being significantly more nice than requests with no semantic softeners or aggravators and requests with aggravators were identified as being significantly more bossy than any of the others.

Children's spontaneous reports of their identification processes, made both during and after the expeirment, also support the importance of semantic cues. Many of the five year olds continuously explained their identifications by saying that requests were nice "because he said please" or bossy "because he said dummy." Several recognized the frequent discrepancy between semantics and other factors, but dismissed these other factors, explaining, for example, that the requests were nice even though they were said loudly or in a mean way, or were bossy in a nice voice. These comments and the fact that several children repeated each request verbatim in the precise tone of voice in which it was made, suggest that they were aware of other factors, but simply did not take them into account in their identifications. The results of Experiment 1 also show that preschoolers have the capacity to respond to all three types of cues. The effect of semantics may be due to the explicit training of semantics in early childhood (e.g., "You can't have it until you say 'please'") that Barrett (1980), Bates (1976), and Becker (1984) have observed.

Visual inspection of Figure 1 also suggests developmental changes in the ways that the requests were identified. It appears that the ten year olds and adults made subtler judgments than did the five year olds.

Neither tone of voice nor syntactic directness seem to have had an appreciable effect on the five year olds' responses; semantics was the critical factor for them. While semantics also affected the ten year olds quite powerfully, they were somewhat more responsive to syntactic directness and to the loud, negative tone of voice, which depressed the effect of semantic softeners. The adults were less responsive to the semantic aggravators, and were more affected by syntactic directness and tone of voice than were the children. A loud, negative tone of voice caused adults to judge virtually all requests as extremely bossy. A soft, positive tone caused adults to see imperatives as nicer than imperatives in a neutral tone.

Adults' greater tendency to take into account more factors than the children in identifying the requests, contrary to prediction, was not also reflected in their responses to an "overly nice" combination of cues by the man speaker. Adults identified hints with three semantic softeners and a positive tone as being extremely nice, in spite of their asserting that the man was sarcastic when he used too many pleases or hints; that he was subtler in his bossiness than the boy. In commenting on their identification processes, adults claimed to have taken many factors into account. They talked about possible "hidden motives" of the man making the requests and how they expected the man to be more polite and so allowed the boy "to get away with more."

General Discussion

Previous research indicates that children's repertoire of requests increases over the preschool years. By the time they enter elementary school, children are adept at producing a wide variety of requests

appropriately in different situations. The findings of the two present experiments demonstrate that children's ability to interpret these requests, to identify status-related nuances requests convey, also develops during and beyond this period. Young children have at least the rudimentary ability to identify bossy and nice requests and this ability is refined with age. Children become increasingly able to take into account more linguistic factors as they get older.

In Experiment 1, preschoolers were able to judge the relative bossiness of requests on the basis of contrasts of syntax, semantics, and tone. They judged direct requests to be bossier than less direct requests, requests with fewer semantic softeners to be bossier than those with more, and loud negative requests to be bossier than requests made in a soft positive tone. Five year olds were capable of making subtler judgments than were four year olds. Yet, the five year olds' subtle interpretive abilities were revealed using only simple comparisons.

In Experiment 2, the five year olds attended primarily to semantic softeners and aggravators in identifying requests as bossy and nice. These requests combined different levels of syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, tone of voice, and speaker status. The ten year olds took into account more factors than the five year olds and the adults took into account all four. Although syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and a loud negative tone generally resulted in bossy identifications and syntactic indirectness, semantic softeners, and a soft positive tone generally resulted in nice identifications, these cues were not weighted equally. Semantic cues were considered most strongly, especially by the children. The demonstration that subjects

do not treat cues in a strictly additive fashion refutes the unsupported assertions of prior theorists (Bates & Silvern, 1977; James, 1978; Lakoff, 1972, 1973).

It is functionally reasonable that characteristics of requests serve to indicate relative status and other aspects of the speaker-listener relationship. They do so because syntactic directness and semantic markers vary so regularly and predictably in different social situations. As has been suggested elsewhere (Becker, 1984), request forms serve to mark or signal status relationships in much the same ways that facial expressions (Camras, 1983; Zivin, 1977), aggressive and submissive postures (McGrew, 1972; Strayer & Strayer, 1976), and visual attention (Chance & Larsen, 1976) do. All four types of social, communicative behaviors help children and adults maintain social order.

The role that requests play in social relationships suggests broader implications for the proper development of the use of requests. Children do not appear to be fully able to convey and interpret pragmatic nuances by means of requests until some time after the age of ten years. To the extent that children are not able to interpret subtle, social messages from peers and adults correctly, they are also not able to respond effectively to those messages in social interaction. That is, pragmatic competence is probably related to social competence. Such a relationship is supported by several studies. Bates and Silvern (1977), in their investigation of two to eight year olds, found that children's ability to interpret requests was positively correlated with teachers' ratings of their conduct. Similarly, Gottman, Gonso, and Rasmussen (1975) found a positive correlation between the number of friends third and fourth

graders had and their knowledge of pragmatic skills useful in making friends (e.g., asking and answering questions). More indirect support is found in social skills training studies (Bierman & Furman, 1984; Ladd, 1981). In both, coaching and practice in conversational skills resulted in improved social interaction and greater peer acceptance.

It is not clear how requests and other pragmatic skills are acquired or why some children are more skilled than others. Children's first request forms are probably learned as unanalyzed wholes, as is the case in other areas of language. Children may learn the social uses of requests by associating others' requests with their intended listeners and contexts of use, by the effectiveness of their own requests, and by explicit training. The language socialization environment, particularly that in the home, is probably a great influence on children's requests. In fact, a number of researchers (Barrett, 1980; Bates, 1976; Becker, 1984; Eisenberg, 1982; Gleason, 1980) have observed that parents frequently prompt and model a wide variety of pragmatic behaviors. Individual differences among families may result in individual differences in children's request abilities and styles. For example, Dirksen (1977) has noted social class differences in the use of requests. Obviously, at any given point in development, children's basic semantic and syntactic abilities will constrain their ability to use requests.

As children gain experience in making and receiving requests, they will gradually deduce the abstract relationships among structural characteristics of requests and structural aspects of social interaction. From this point, social cognitive and cognitive abilities no doubt play important roles. Children's awareness of characteristics of their listeners

and the social context, their ability to take others' perspectives, and their capacity for considering aspects of language and context simultaneously should help them to produce and respond to requests in increasingly subtle and sophisticated ways. Increasing experiences as well as improving social cognitive and cognitive abilities probably account for the observed developmental changes in the ability to interpret requests with nuances.

Precisely how experience, social cognition, and cognition affect children's understanding and use of requests are topics for future research. In addition, it will be important to investigate how children's skills in using requests and other pragmatic abilities affect their social relationships with peers and adults.

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Table 1

Stimulus Sentences in Experiment 1

<u>Contrasts of syntactic directness</u>	
Gimme a penny.	(imperative)
I really like pennies.	(hint)
I need a penny.	(need statement)
May I have a penny?	(permission directive)
Will you give me some pennies?	(embedded imperative)
Do you have any pennies left?	(question directive)
<u>Contrasts of semantics</u>	
I want a penny.	(general verb form)
I would like a penny.	(polite verb form)
Can I have a penny?	(general verb form)
May I have a penny?	(polite verb form)
Give me a penny.	(no softeners)
Give me a penny, please.	(semantic softener)
(First name), give me a penny.	(name)
(Mr./Miss last name), give me a penny.	(title)
<u>Contrast of volume and tone</u>	
GIVE ME A PENNY!	(loud and negative)
Give me a penny.	(soft and neutral)

Table 2

Proportion of Children in Each Age Group Responding as

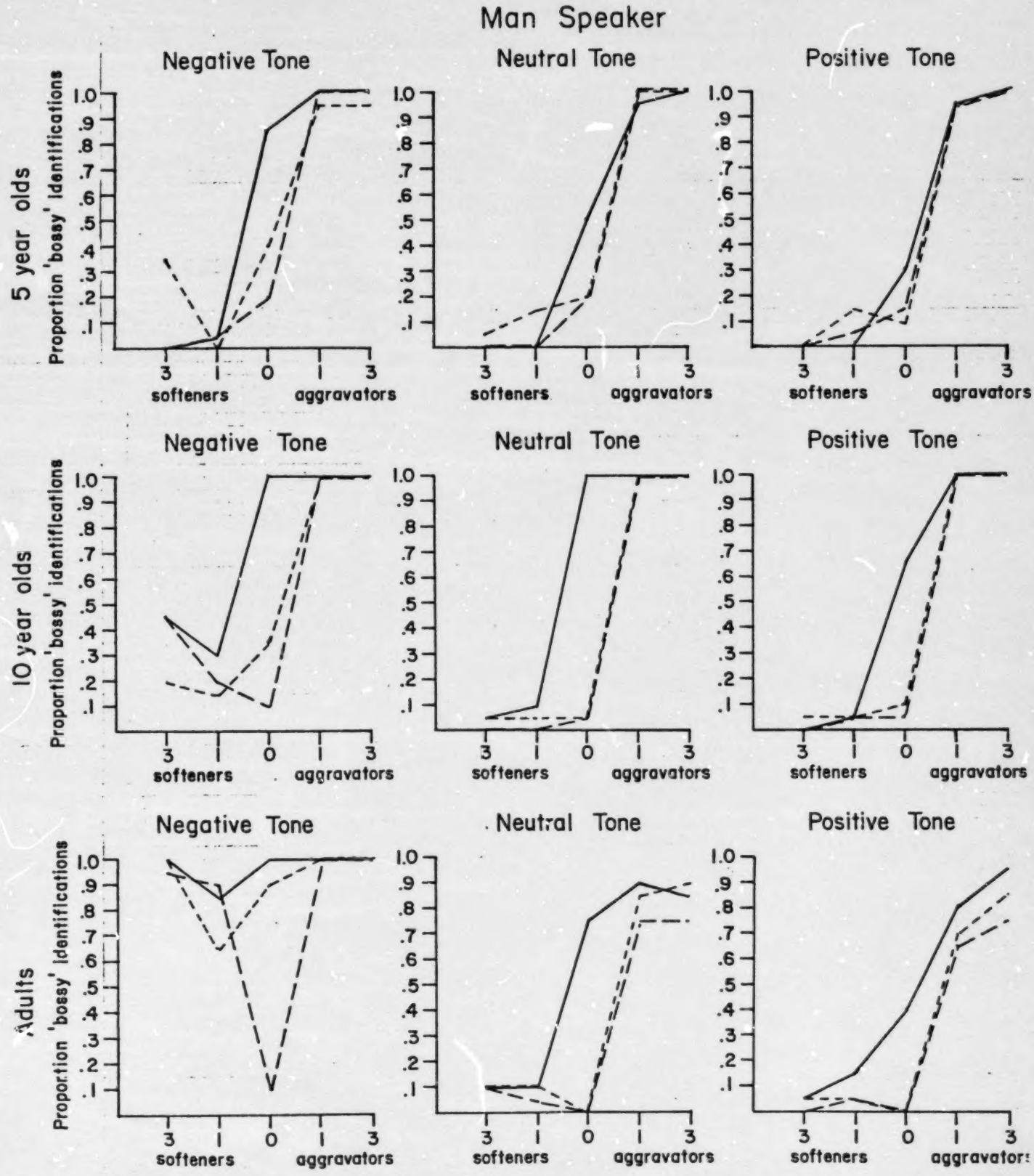
Predicted to Each Request Contrast

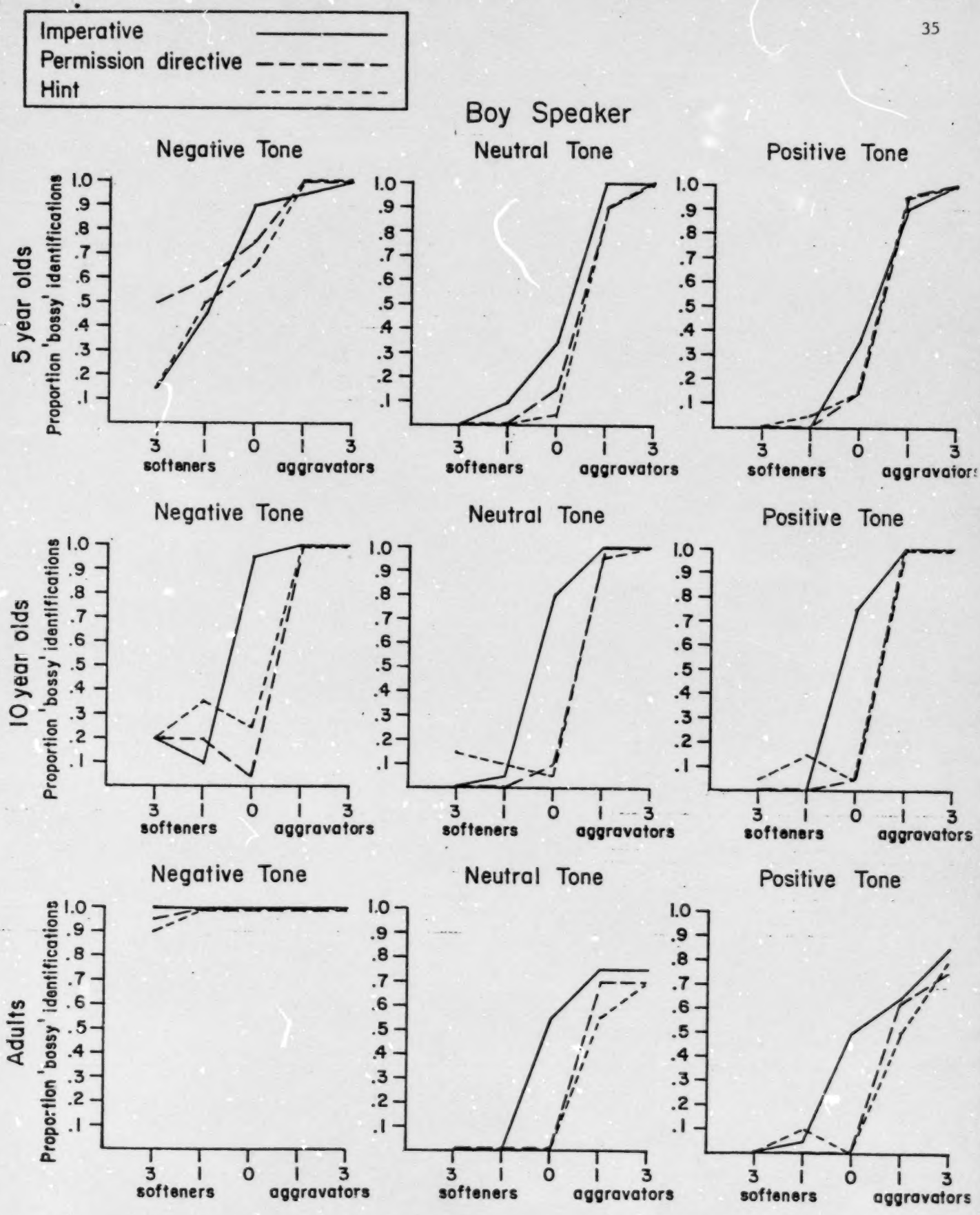
	4 year olds	5 year olds
GIVE ME A PENNY! Give me a penny.	.94**	1.00**
I want a penny. I would like a penny.	.81*	1.00**
Gimme a penny. I really like pennies.	.75*	.94**
I need a penny. May I have a penny?	.69	1.00**
Will you give me some pennies? Do you have any pennies left?	.69	.81*
Can I have a penny? May I have a penny?	.69	.75*
Give me a penny. Give me a penny, please.	.38	1.00**
(First name), give me a penny. (Mr./Miss last name), give me a penny.	.38	.81*

χ^2: * = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .001$

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Interaction of Age x Semantics x Intonation x Speaker on Bossy Identifications.


Man Speaker
Negative Tone
Neutral Tone
Positive Tone
5 year olds
10 year olds
Adults
Proportion 'bossy' identifications
1.0
.9
.8
.7
.6
.5
.4
.3
.2
.1
3 2 1 0 1 2 3
softeners
aggravators


Imperative
Permission directive
Hint
Boy Speaker
Negative Tone
Neutral Tone
Positive Tone
5 year olds
10 year olds
Adults
Proportion 'bossy' identifications
1.0
.9
.8
.7
.6
.5
.4
.3
.2
.1
3 2 1 0 1 2 3
softeners
aggravators